



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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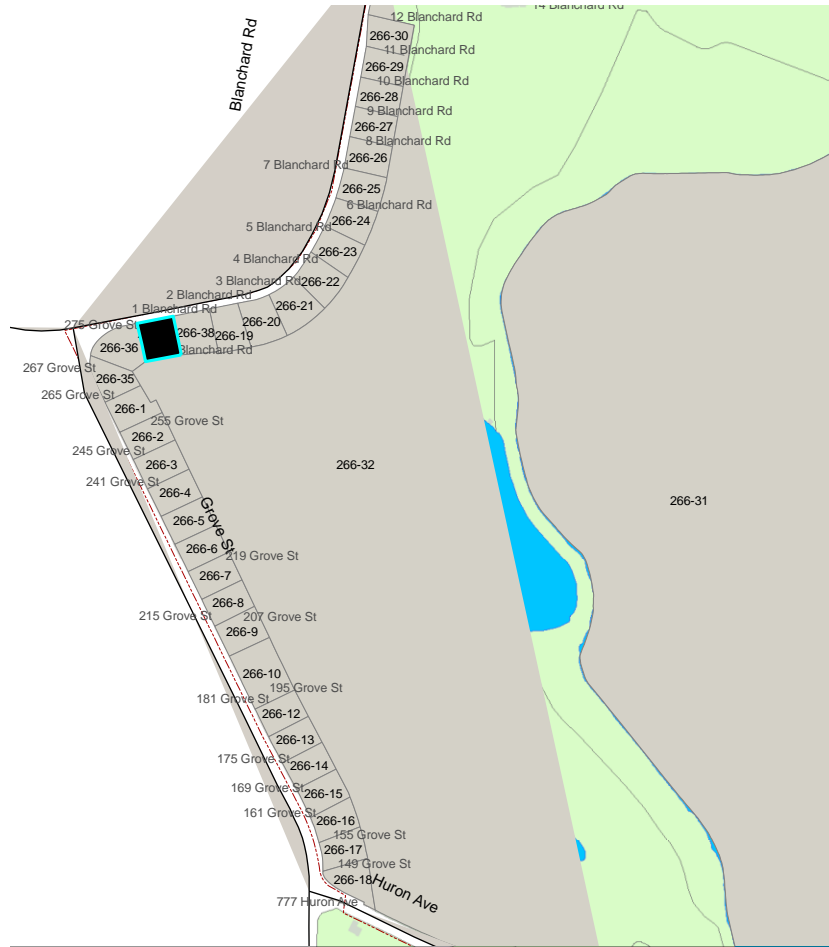
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Shary Page Berg, Joseph V. Ferrara, Susannah Barton Tobin, Alternates

Date: November 29, 2010
To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Eiliesh Tuffy, Preservation Administrator
Re: 0-12 Blanchard Road and 149-267 Grove Street
Petitioned for Neighborhood Conservation District Study

Background

The petitioned area includes multiple residences along Blanchard Road and Grove Street, between Huron Avenue and Concord Avenue. These properties are at the western edge of Fresh Pond Reservoir in West Cambridge on the Cambridge-Belmont city boundary. A petition was received on October 26, 2010 to consider initiating a landmark study of the property. The petition was forwarded to the Elections Commission and the signatures of the petitioners were verified.

The petition, as written, includes 32 of the 33 original parcels marketed by the City of Cambridge in the early 1950s as part of a comprehensive residential development marketed specifically to war veterans. The property at 777 Huron Ave. was omitted from the address range on the petition, but is also one of the sites marketed by the city at that time.



Blanchard Rd. – Grove St.
area, Cambridge GIS,
November 2010

The parcels in this development are located within a Residential A-2 zoning district, a single-family residence zone that allows an FAR of .50 and a minimum of 4,500 square feet per dwelling unit. The height limit in this zone is 35 feet. The average lot size is 10,000 square feet.

The typical setback is approximately 30 feet from the street and the rear yards slope down, abutting the Fresh Pond golf course. Proximity to the golf course was used as a marketing tool in the original sales brochure, which promoted “Country Club home sites in Cambridge.”

Recent projects in the neighborhood have been of a larger scale than the original houses in the development, raising concerns with some property owners over the height and footprint of renovated or newly constructed houses.



201 Grove St. (1960; C. Harry Erickson, architect), Cambridge Assessors Database photo

Conservation District Criteria and Goals

Conservation Districts are enacted by the City Council upon recommendation of the Historical Commission. The Commission commences a conservation district designation study process by its own initiative or by voting to accept a petition of ten registered voters. The Commission may decline to accept petitions that do not meet the criteria for conservation district designation.

The criteria provided in the ordinance outlines eligible neighborhoods as:

any area within the City containing places and structures which it determines are of importance to the architectural, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City, and which considered together cause such area to constitute a distinctive neighborhood or to have a distinctive character in terms of its exterior features (2.78.180.A)

The purpose of establishing Neighborhood Conservation Districts is described in the ordinance, which was enacted to,

preserve, conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City and to improve the quality of its environment through identification, conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods, sites and structures which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods, areas, or structures; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the city a more desirable place in which to live and work. (2.78.140)

Relationship to Criteria

The land occupied by the Blanchard-Grove subdivision was annexed from the Town of Belmont in 1880 to protect the purity of the Fresh Pond watershed. In 1888 the legislature authorized the city to take land abutting the pond by eminent domain, and by 1890 the entire present Fresh Pond Reservation was in city hands. Despite the introduction of local trolley and bus service in the early 20th century, real estate development in the vicinity was scarce. It wasn't until 1951 – following the end of World War II and beginning of the baby boom – that the city, with legislative permission, subdivided the road frontage for lots that were marketed as veterans' housing. Lot sizes were spacious by Cambridge standards, and more in keeping with typical suburban lot sizes of this period. The Blanchard-Grove development is considered the last large-scale residential subdivision in the city.

The *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge: Northwest Cambridge* mentions the houses on Blanchard Road and Grove Street for their role in the overall development of the city, their relationship to the surrounding landscape, and the mid-20th century architectural styles that were widespread throughout the 1950s-60s.

These were magnificently sited, overlooking the Municipal Golf Course (1933) and fronting the Belmont line along Grove and Blanchard Streets, on what had been upland of the Bright and Gay farms, annexed to Cambridge in 1891. Within a decade the area was completely developed as an attractive suburban neighborhood of single-family homes, many designed by well-known architects for prominent civic officials.

Common architectural styles that were employed throughout the subdivision included modern adaptations of colonial New England houses such as the Garrison and Cape Cod cottage. These historically-based designs were interspersed between more contemporary houses in the International and Ranch styles.

The International Style houses were designed by the likes of architect Carl Koch and his contemporaries. Koch, who received his architectural training at Harvard under the tutelage of Walter Gropius, was responsible for designing the residence at 219 Grove Street (1952) for former Cambridge Mayor Edward Crane. The Crane house pre-dates Koch's Techbuilt houses by one year, and is thought to have been a prototype for these later designs. The generously sized housing lots along the Fresh Pond Reservation were well suited for the long, linear Ranch houses. A popular suburban housing model, the Ranch became ubiquitous in post-World War II America. Examples along Blanchard Road and Grove Street were built in both brick and wood siding, alternating solid wall sections with large expanses of glass.



219 Grove Street (1952; Carl Koch, architect), Cambridge Assessors Database photo

Architects working in the area at this time included: Carl Koch, Stanley Myers, Peter White, Harland Perkins, Alfred Jackson, Harry Jackson, George Reynolds, James Rice, and the firm of Palmquist and Wright.



7 Blanchard Road (1953; Stanley L. Myers, architect), Cambridge Assessors Database photo

The collection of houses along Blanchard Road and Grove street exemplifies two very different approaches to housing design that were concurrent during the mid 20th-century: one replicating elements of historic building styles and the other experimenting with new forms to create modern

housing. As a whole, these two streets illustrate the final phase of residential subdivision in the city and architectural styles that were indicative of the period.

Staff Recommendations

It is the staff opinion that the properties in the Blanchard Road-Grove Street area may be eligible for neighborhood conservation district designation for their associations with the broad cultural, economic, and social history of the city due to the subdivision's intent as a neighborhood for returning veterans, the prominent role of many of the original residents in local government, the area's direct association with several notable architects, and for the properties' architectural significance as a rare grouping of mid-20th century residential designs within the City of Cambridge. The staff recommends that the Commission hear testimony from the petitioners and property owners within the proposed study area before voting on initiation of a landmark designation study for the property.

cc: Amy Nadel